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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that student behavior is influenced by many factors, and teacher responses to disorderly conduct must be based upon a careful assessment of each student's current situation as well as of the teacher's own role in the classroom. This review of the literature discusses common factors affecting student behavior; underlines the need for identifying behavior problems early and communicating with students and parents; and suggests 15 positive responses to behavior problems that are suitable to different circumstances. Five teacher behaviors that can influence student behaviors are discussed: modeling good behavior, designing suitable learning spaces, interacting with students, responding to student attempts to improve, and assessing student learning for purposes of promoting development. The possible impact of non-classroom staff, the curriculum, and the community on both the development of and the solutions to behavior problems is also explored. The document concludes with a listing of the 70 references concerning student behavior and discipline cited in the literature review, and two dozen additional references on the topic. (Author/PGD)

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What Research Says to the Teacher

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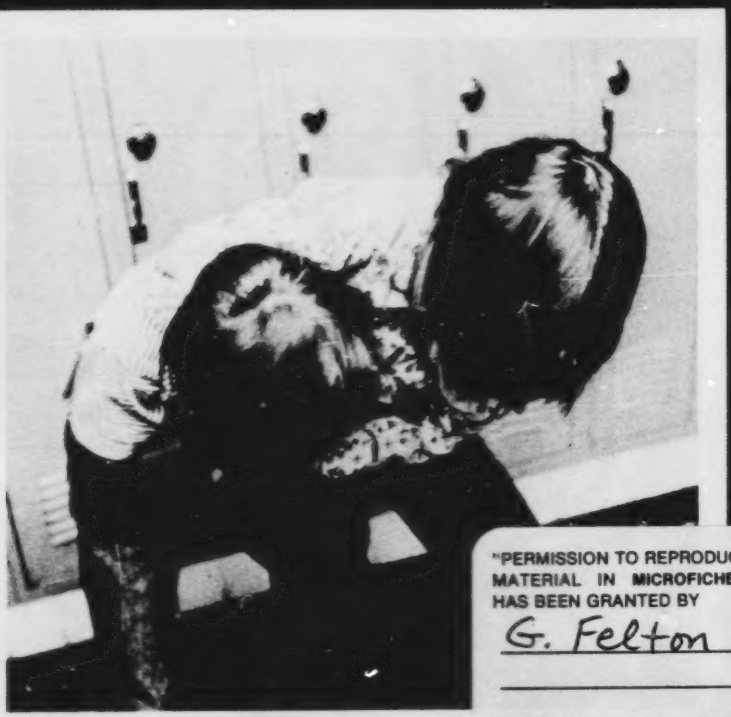
Disruptive Student Behavior in the Classroom

by Kevin J. Swick



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INTRODUCTION

A major challenge confronting teachers is the handling of classroom behavior problems. In the past there has been a tendency to view disruptive student behavior as a problem evolving solely in the classroom and thus solvable by simply altering certain conditions that prompt the deviant actions. Recent research suggests, however, that student behavior (at various grade levels) is influenced by many factors, and teacher responses to disorderly conduct must be based upon a careful assessment of each student's position in life as well as of the teacher's own role in the classroom. Teachers and researchers who attempt to find easy solutions to any human deviancy have and will continue to meet with frustration. Human behavior is too complex to be adapted to any single cause–effect syndrome. Indeed, many "disruptive students" have increased their negative social responses because they have been dealt with as "problems." Thus, the purpose of this research report is to explore promising practices teachers can use in responding to behavior problems that emerge in their classrooms.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT OF STUDENT BEHAVIOR

Individuals behave in certain ways as a result of the variety of genetic and sociocultural forces that have influenced their development. While responding to student behavior problems without understanding their context can be an efficient way of managing the classroom, far too often students are stereotyped as "discipline problems" simply because no one has attempted to find out why they behave in a negative manner. The effectiveness of various methods of handling behavior problems can be maximized when the teacher involved understands the student's predicament.

An examination of how one teacher responded to disruptive behavior in the classroom reveals how important it is for educators to understand the context of behavior:

Bill (grade four) launches a paper airplane and then trips Ed who is on his way to the pencil sharpener. Mr. Wyatt reprimands Bill and exclaims, "That will be points off your social studies grade! If it happens again," Mr. Wyatt says, "you'll flunk this term." Later, in the lounge Mr. Wyatt expresses disgust that he got Bill in his section. "The kid's been a problem since he entered school," he growls.

The reader might wonder if anyone has asked *why* Bill has continuously been a "behavior problem" at school. Does it do any good to threaten a student with failure? Why doesn't Mr. Wyatt examine his personal attitude toward the student? From a research perspective, Mr. Wyatt responded ineffectively to the behavior problem in the classroom. The following behaviors (used by Mr. Wyatt) should be avoided when dealing with classroom behavior problems:

1. Overreacting to the problem.
2. Using threats.
3. Using punishment that is unrelated to the behavior.
4. Admonishing the student in front of peers.
5. Losing emotional control.
6. Discussing the situation with colleagues in unproductive and unethical ways.
7. Assessing the problem without a thorough examination of the situation. (7, 26, 36)

Mr. Wyatt would have been more effective in dealing with Bill had he used some of the following behaviors:

1. Asking Bill to leave the room with him for a moment.
2. Discussing with Bill why the behavior is unacceptable and other factors related to Bill's behavior.
3. Examining the home situation, peer group setting, and other factors that might influence Bill's behavior.
4. Asking Bill to apologize to the student he tripped and making any punishment pertinent to correcting the misbehavior.
5. Meeting with Bill and possibly his parents if the problem has existed for a long time; through such a meeting a possible solution could be worked out. (7, 40)

By looking at the context of student behavior, many teacher–student conflicts can be solved in a positive manner. Consider the following as influences that affect student behavior—yet they often go unnoticed by teachers in their responding to behavior problems: malnutrition, child abuse/neglect, life cycle changes, teen-age pregnancy, drug abuse, excessive television viewing, violence in the home, community disorder,

lack of family support, peer conflicts, mental health problems, lack of sleep, and other sociocultural events. For example, the relationships described in the following chart have been established through continuous research. (25, 44, 64, 72, 83)

Influence	*Related Behavior Often Observed*
1. Malnutrition	Hyperactivity Drowsiness Easy loss of temper Irritability
2. Lack of Sleep	Inattentiveness Short attention span Irritability Inability to complete assignments
3. Child Abuse/Neglect	Withdrawn, sullen Aggressiveness, takes out anxiety on peers and teacher Poor attendance record Excessive seeking of attention
4. Excessive Television Viewing	Short attention span Extreme aggressiveness Difficulty in following directions Inability to complete work assignments
5. Violence in the Home	Extreme anxiety level Withdrawn and very depressed Poor attendance record Constant seeking of attention

Factors within the school may also be influencing student behavior in a negative manner. Teachers should ask themselves questions such as the following as they assess the context of student behavior problems:

1. Does the environment of the school encourage human relationships? Are people friendly, personable, and concerned about each other? Or is the setting hostile, impersonal, and lacking in human warmth? (39)
2. How do I have my classroom organized in terms of the physical setting? Do the students understand what is expected of them? As a teacher do I have control of the class and provide direction in terms of daily routines? (37)

3. Do I know the students in a personal way? Have I taken time to relate to the student's families, the community, and the special situations that influence the students' behavior in the classroom? (41)
4. Is the instructional program relevant to the needs and interests of the students? Or are many of the students bored because I ask them to repeat work that they have already mastered? (76)
5. As the teacher have I allowed the students an opportunity to develop some of the classroom rules by which they are to function? Do I listen to student explanations of problem situations? (26)

Answers to questions such as these are critical when you are attempting to determine why teachers and students respond to classroom predicaments as they do. Environments in which students are valued, listened to, and made a part of the instructional process are more likely to promote positive student behavior than are settings in which students are degraded and forced to find their own psychological space in a hostile way.

The cycle of negative student behavior–negative teacher response–further negative student response can only be remedied when the conditions that are causing the disruptive behavior are identified, examined, and used as the basis for improving the situation. Students who are experiencing a difficult life at home are certain to behave differently in the classroom from their peers who have a positive home life. Likewise, students who have been categorized as "problems" year after year are likely to fulfill this prophecy by continuing to behave in disruptive ways. However, through an examination of the context of student behavior (including the teacher's influence), many behavior problems can be solved. (92, 93)

IDENTIFYING STUDENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS EARLY

Student behavior problems usually are the result of a long-term process during which the student—in interacting with the environment—develops certain behaviors that are unacceptable to the teacher and/or other students. (6) The early identification of potential behavior problems can lead to the avoidance of more serious student crises. (45) The following is one example of how a problem—left undetected—can evolve into a more serious predicament.

September: Jane Low (ninth grader) discovers she is pregnant. Her schoolwork is poor and so is her attendance, which is in contrast to her usual behavior. No one at school or at home takes notice of the change in behavior.

October: Jane's school behavior continues to deteriorate. Her below-average scores on the first grade report prompt her parents to restrict her social life. But no one has really inquired why Jane is behaving so differently!

November: Jane is reported missing by her parents! School officials are stunned. No one seems to know why she is missing.

December: Jane is found in Florida!

This example not only brings into focus the importance of identifying glaring changes in student behavior early but also points to the need for broadening our understanding of such problems. Too often student behavior problems are viewed only as situations that disrupt the teacher's functioning. In Jane's case the disruption is of a student-centered nature, affecting her learning and functioning. Teachers need to *observe* student behavior in terms of how it affects not only the class but most importantly the student involved in the situation. (40) Through natural observation teachers and Jane's parents should have noticed the changes in her behavior and inquired, "Why the change?" or "Jane, is something wrong—can we help?"

Not only did Jane's problem go unnoticed, but also apparently no one (at home or at school) talked with Jane. *Communicating with and counseling students* is a proven method of preventing many discipline problems. Every student should have at least one adult confidant they can trust while in school. Hopefully, a similar situation would exist at home. Teachers who counsel and interact with their students on a regular basis report that not only do they *know* their students better, but also they are more able to detect problems that might develop into more severe situations at a later time. (39, 46, 52, 54) For example:

Ms. Green: "John, you really seem bothered lately!"
John: "Oh!"
Ms. Green: "Yes, you seem off in your own world."
John: "Well, things aren't too hot at home these days!"
Ms. Green: "John, have you talked with your parents about it? You know that might help."
John: "Oh, I just don't know."
Ms. Green: "Feel free to stop and talk with me, John. Sometimes that can help."

Indeed, realizing that someone is concerned and willing to listen can be the initial step in solving a problem or at least learning to cope with it.

Another very effective way of minimizing student behavior problems is to *keep in touch with parents*. This can help to accomplish two purposes: to develop communications between home and school, and to encourage parents to be involved with their children's development and educational progress. Research findings indicate that when a positive home–school relationship exists and when parents are highly supportive of their children's educational endeavors, the school performance of students increases in a positive direction. From a practical standpoint, when parents and teachers are communicating with each other, they will certainly be more likely to handle behavior problems than if such linkages do not exist. (73, 83, 92)

Finally, there are some *warning signals* that teachers look for when attempting to identify classroom behavior problems early. (7, 21, 58, 65) Some of these are as follows:

1. A drastic change in a student's behavior or routine may indicate a change in the life context of that student. A child who is normally outgoing and who suddenly becomes withdrawn is usually signaling for help.
2. A student who exhibits extreme behavior indices usually has some dysfunction in terms of human functioning. For example, an extremely aggressive child needs immediate attention and assistance in reorganizing her or his behavior. A child who is very listless may be telling the teacher that she or he is abused, malnourished, or not getting proper rest or attention at home. Do not allow these extremes to go unattended; they can develop into severe discipline problems.
3. A student who is always unprepared, constantly disorganized, and generally unable to handle basic classroom routines is indicating to the teacher that she or he is in need of "organizational help." Such a student, if allowed to continue in this manner, will eventually have a negative effect on other students and generate other problems for herself or himself and the teacher.
4. A student who is unable to accept even the most basic authority limits necessary for classroom management should receive immediate attention. The "I don't have to do that" syndrome can create a climate of chaos in the classroom and will only have negative effects on everyone involved.
5. The student and the teacher who have role conflicts and/or personality clashes early in the school year are, if left unattended, headed for more severe problems later in the school year! The teacher, upon recognizing such a situation, needs to examine his or her part

in the conflict as well as assessing the student's part. By resolving the problem early in the school year, everyone can have a more productive learning experience.

Additional indicators of pending behavior problems include a poor attendance record, continuous problems with completing assignments, ongoing conflicts with peers, uncorrected health problems, severe conflicts in the home setting, and related teacher attitudes and/or school factors that may be encouraging disruptive student behavior. [See (83).]

In essence, research indicates that teachers (and parents) can prevent many serious student behavior problems by identifying them early and by formulating plans to correct such behaviors. Through observing, counseling, and communicating with students, teachers, and parents, a positive relationship can be formed, and thus a majority of discipline problems prevented from taking place.

POSITIVE RESPONSES TO STUDENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

In any group setting, behavior that disrupts the functioning of others is undesirable. It is, however, natural that some conflict occurs in small or large group settings such as the classroom. Teachers who expect students to behave ideally every day are going to be frustrated in their efforts to work with children and young people in a positive manner. Children, like adults, have strong feelings about themselves and others, and sometimes these feelings emerge in conflict with those of others. A classroom without problems of some kind would be unreal. The most positive view of the classroom recognizes the possibilities of student and teacher behavior problems, while at the same time attempting to design a setting where they are minimized and handled appropriately. (27, 42, 60, 94)

The question most frequently asked by first-year teachers is: What is the best way to deal with discipline problems? Of course, there is no single answer. Researchers have explored a variety of techniques for use in handling classroom behavior problems. While one approach may work effectively in one situation, it may be totally ineffective in a different context. There are, however, several practices that classroom teachers and researchers have found to be effective in dealing with classroom behavior problems.

Utilize a Preventive Approach

Many behavior problems can be prevented when the teacher knows the students he or she is working with, has a well-organized program of studies, exhibits an aura of confidence in his or her own teaching style, has a sense of humor, and is involved with the students in a meaningful manner. Some practices that teachers have found useful in getting the school year off to a good start include the following: (1) sending "getting to know you" letters to students before school opens, (2) visiting or calling parents of the students who will be in their classroom, (3) utilizing the initial part of the school year to establish positive relationships with the students, and (4) organizing the classroom around the needs (developmental, social, and educational) of the students who will be in the classroom. By utilizing these and other practices, teachers can prevent many classroom problems from taking place. (54, 58, 71)

Establish Fair Limits

Research indicates that when students understand what is expected of them, their behavior is more consistent, more constructive, and more reflective of what the teacher desires in the classroom. It has been further established that when students perceive classroom rules and limits as fair and reasonable, they behave in productive ways. It is advisable, therefore, to establish a few needed rules at the beginning of the school year. Long lists of do's and don't's confuse students and give them a negative impression of what learning is all about. When students are involved in setting these limits and/or are able to see the need for such limits, many group behavior problems can be prevented. For example, when students understand the need for limiting the number of individuals at a learning station, usually they will comply. Students (especially those who lack self-management skills) desire some direction and limits from an adult so that they can function effectively in the classroom. In many classrooms student behavior problems occur because limits have not been set or because the established rules do not make sense. (54, 65, 86)

Set a Positive Example

Classroom teachers can provide students with an exemplary model of how to behave and learn. The teacher who is well organized and

enthusiastic about the subject matter is certain to infect at least some students with a similar desire to learn. The teacher who is disorganized, unmotivated, and cynical is "inviting" students to misbehave. According to research findings, teachers who listen to students, have a relevant curriculum, and involve students in active learning have fewer behavior problems than do their less involved counterparts. (2, 20, 33, 43)

Restore Order When a Problem Occurs

When a discipline problem occurs in the classroom, students are watching to see how the teacher will handle the situation. The restoration of order is the first priority. Identify where the problem exists and direct your efforts toward restoring the class to an orderly routine. Avoid emotional outbursts which often lead to further disruption and serve no useful purpose. If the problem is a minor one, treat it as such and direct the student(s) to return to work. If a more serious problem exists, you may want to take the student from the classroom and have the aide or another adult watch the class temporarily. By constructively dealing with the situation, you will demonstrate to the students that you are in control of things and feel at ease in the classroom. (19, 55, 68)

Handle Your Own Problems Whenever Possible

A very important research finding is that people who exhibit a sense of control and direction are viewed as effective leaders. This is certainly true of classroom teachers. The teacher who is constantly sending disruptive students to the principal's office is inviting further trouble and may eventually lose total control of the students. While there may be situations that warrant outside help, avoid delegating classroom management to others whenever possible. Students respond positively to teachers who are able to manage their own classrooms. Even the disruptive student is impressed by the "teacher in control" and is more likely to improve her or his behavior with such a teacher than with one who must always search for the principal to handle problems. (19, 56, 60)

Locate the Real Problem

In far too many cases student behavior problems are dealt with in the immediacy of occurrence. Once order has been restored to the class-

room, examine the situation more thoroughly. Was the behavior reflective of a continuous student problem? Is the student utilizing this behavior to avoid coping with the real problem? Does the situation reflect a student–teacher value conflict? As the teacher am I overreacting to behavior that is really a normal part of human development? Are conditions in the classroom, at home, or in the community prompting students to misbehave? The answers to these questions can help you find out what the real problem is. (2, 73, 94)

Change the Classroom Environment When Needed

When students are constantly disruptive, this may be a signal that the classroom setting needs reorganizing. In some cases there may be too many students in the room for orderly learning to take place. Most human beings respond negatively to overcrowding. Beyond reducing the number of students in the classroom, teachers can attempt to maximize the space available by employing small-group seating arrangements or by using corridors (where possible) and other space within the school. Maximum use of "outdoor learning" centers can also be effective in reducing discipline problems. (37, 47, 54, 65)

Provide Alternatives to Undesirable Behavior

Develop a set of alternatives that students can use in learning to manage their behavior positively. A common discipline problem is the student who yells or jumps to get the teacher's attention. Develop an alternative whereby students can achieve their goal without causing a major disturbance in the classroom. Research also indicates that teachers can benefit from developing alternative behaviors in their teaching styles, thus using different behaviors according to the individual characteristics of students. For example, in some cases a firm voice is effective in communicating with students, while in other situations a gentle voice is more appropriate. Keep in mind that while alternatives are effective in maintaining classroom order, they are not the *answer* to discipline problems. Eventually the teacher and the student must resolve the problem that is causing the misbehavior. (8, 27, 40, 58)

Help Students Understand the Consequences of Their Behavior

The sooner students are able to perceive the consequences of their behavior, the greater the possibilities are for improvement in their approach to life. This is why it is so important for teachers (and parents) to utilize discipline approaches that ultimately bring students to the realization that their negative behavior has detrimental effects on themselves as well as others. When a student can see how his or her actions made others feel badly and, in turn, caused others to have negative feelings toward him or her, a basis for changing the situation then exists. Likewise, reasonable corrective measures can—if applied when the problem is still solvable—help students realize that positive behavior is more conducive to successful group functioning than are negative actions. Research indicates there is a hidden message in this practice for teachers, too! For example, disorganized classrooms, poorly planned instructional units, and hostile teacher attitudes toward students have a degrading effect on student self concepts which is certain to foster discipline problems. (7, 27, 30, 57)

Make Provisions for a "Time Out" Space

All human beings have a tolerance level beyond which self control is lost. In some cases (especially with children who have never benefitted from having "self space") a student's tolerance level is very low indeed. These students are, in such cases, signaling to us their need for time to organize their behavior so that they can function better in a group. Providing a place where disruptive students can go to think about their behavior, gain control of their emotions, and organize themselves more coherently can not only alleviate many problems but also provide a framework for students to solve their own problems. Once again this practice is very relevant to helping teachers handle their own problems. There should be a place and resources in the school that teachers can use in "getting themselves together" when conditions exist where they need some "time out." Classrooms where only large-group instruction is used are not conducive to providing students and teachers with the "personal space" needed to function effectively. (19, 65, 77)

Help Students Modify Their Behavior

Research indicates that when students learn ways to modify their behavior, they are acquiring self-management skills needed for developing positive approaches to classroom functioning. An effective way to use this procedure is to have disruptive students keep a daily log of their behavior patterns. Some teachers use a check sheet and, at the end of the day, review the progress made by the student in eliminating undesirable behavior. This is a transitional behavior management technique because the ultimate goal is for the student to reach a level of maturity where s/he can monitor her or his own behavior. (17, 20, 81, 91)

Use Group Counseling Procedures To Promote Positive Behavior

Group behavior problems often emerge as a result of role conflict, misunderstanding of group functions, and/or lack of group cohesiveness. An effective method of solving, clarifying, and possibly preventing group conflict is the use of group counseling sessions. Such sessions can be used to involve students in value clarification, classroom behavior rules, and problem solving and to provide them with opportunities to develop teaming skills. Probably one of the most valuable results of these sessions is the understanding that can be developed among students about their function as a group and about their individual relationships with each other and with the teacher. (4, 14, 30, 52, 78)

Avoid Reinforcing Negative Behaviors

By the very act of attending to a behavior pattern, the teacher, unknowingly, is reinforcing it. Ignoring minor nuances and incidental classroom behaviors can usually decrease their occurrence. Redirecting a student's behavior toward more constructive activities is another way of failing to reinforce the undesirable behavior. Cueing behavior (giving the student subtle but clear suggestions on how to change his or her behavior) can be an effective way to help the student move from an undesirable point toward another more acceptable place in the classroom. For example, "John, I think you've spent enough time in group work; I'd like you to help me clean these work areas." With this approach the teacher avoids dwelling on John's negative behavior and

helps him make a transition to a more positive role in the classroom. Dwelling on minor student disturbances can only lead students to increase their disruptive behavior. (24, 31, 40, 58)

Invite Students To Succeed in the Classroom

Self-concept research indicates that successful students are invited to participate in the learning process in a meaningful way. Teachers who give students a great deal of verbal and nonverbal attention usually find such students to be very positive in their approach to functioning in the classroom. Research also indicates that while teachers have little trouble sending positive invitations to students whom they perceive as able and worthwhile, they are much less effective in doing this with "problem students." When students who are having problems begin to receive positive messages from the teacher (on a continuous basis), they appear to become more productive human beings. The cycle of negative messages–negative behavior–negative messages must be replaced with a positive behavior cycle. (35, 41, 55, 71)

Dealing with Cases of Pathological Behavior

In some situations a student may have developed pathological behavior patterns. Such patterns are often exhibited either in the student's total inability to function in the group or in her or his hostile and aggressive interaction with peers and teachers. This type of student can only have a negative effect on herself or himself and on the other students. The classroom is not the place to attempt to solve such psychological problems. Consult with the appropriate school officials, parents, and community agencies in an attempt to refer the student for professional care. Indeed, in very severe cases the student may need to be removed from the classroom until restored to a higher level of mental health. Once an appropriate level of mental stability has been achieved, the student can gradually be mainstreamed back into the classroom. (18, 86, 93)

There is a variety of positive responses teachers can use in dealing with discipline problems. Many of these responses and approaches have been reviewed in this part of the book. It is worth noting that no single

approach to classroom discipline exists. Rather, research and effective practice have shown that it is how the teacher uses the different responses with students in the classroom that makes the difference.

THE TEACHER AND STUDENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

The classroom teacher is the key person in establishing a basis for positive student behavior. There are at least five teacher behavior categories that, when combined, have a tremendous influence on how students progress in the classroom because they set the stage for introducing students to a "way of life" in the classroom. These behaviors are *modeling*, *designing*, *interacting*, *responding*, and *assessing*.

Modeling

Teachers express a great deal about classroom management through their behavior. The teacher who uses a loud voice every minute of the day will soon find the students doing the same thing. The following conversation is indicative of how we often bring about student behavior we dislike:

Mr. Fern:	Ms. Edwards, I certainly appreciate your visiting my classroom today. Did you notice how disorderly the students are?
Ms. Edwards:	Yes, I did. May I make a suggestion?
Mr. Fern:	Why, yes!
Ms. Edwards:	If I were you, one of the first things I would do is clean up this room!

Similarly, well-organized, personable, and alert teachers usually have students who behave in friendly and positive ways. If student behavior is a constant problem, the first thing to examine is your own teaching behavior.

1. Are you organized in your own teaching behavior?
2. Have you established a direction for students by your behavior?
3. When a problem occurs, do you respond as a person in control of things, or do you overreact?

Various observation studies of teacher behaviors indicate that many discipline problems are rooted in the inadequate models students have to

follow. Teachers who set positive examples are utilizing a very effective instructional technique: *modeling*. (2, 22, 33, 46, 71)

Designing

The classroom is an environment that, by design, influences student behavior. Poorly designed classrooms can encourage student discipline problems. For example, environments that are overcrowded and that lack "human space" for students to move from one activity to another increase the chances of students' misbehaving. Research indicates that students are more likely to behave incorrectly in classrooms where there are no physical lines of movement than in those that have such limits. The classroom with rows of desks rather than flexible seating arrangements is not conducive to productive student behavior. Students and teachers need time to see and interact with each other if they are to form positive relationships. (19, 37, 47, 60)

There is another vital part of a well-designed classroom. The "social and psychological design" of the classroom can either promote positive actions or encourage disruptive behavior. When students are able to find a place where they are valued, have chances for positive interactions with others, and can develop their individual talents, they usually are positive in their behavior. Studies on disruptive behavior indicate that such students exhibit negative behavior responses in situations where they are neither valued nor made a part of the classroom process. (6, 13, 24, 35, 40)

The following questions are useful in attempting to examine the kind of classroom you have designed:

1. How are student work areas designed? Are seating arrangements conducive to student–teacher communications?
2. If a learning centers approach is used in the classroom, are the centers well organized and clearly defined? Can students move from center to center without disrupting each other's activities?
3. Does the classroom have a pleasant appearance and reflect the kinds of learning outcomes desired of the students? For example, are student work samples on display?
4. Is the classroom designed to provide for the students' social needs as well as for their individual needs? Do students have time during the day for informal socialization? Is each student involved in opportunities to develop individual skills and talents?
5. Does the design of the classroom allow for parental involvement in the educational process? Parent–teacher communication is essential for developing meaningful student behavior guidelines.

Classrooms that are drab in appearance, poorly organized, overcrowded, and in general too institutional in nature are places where students perform poorly—both intellectually and socially. In contrast, pleasantly designed classrooms where students are involved in productive learning stimulate positive behavior among students and teachers. (27, 37, 58)

Interacting

Teachers who systematically work at interacting with students have fewer discipline problems than do teachers who minimize their communication with students. This premise applies to nonverbal as well as verbal interaction between teachers and students. Observational studies of teacher behavior indicate that teachers interact (verbally and nonverbally) more with students they like than with students they dislike—thus creating many behavior problems that could be avoided. (4, 9, 27, 31, 71)

Students have reported to counselors, parents, and researchers the positive reinforcement that they received when a teacher took the time to focus on something they accomplished. To be ignored, treated as a "slow learner," or isolated from classroom events does not foster positive student behavior. Some teachers have found the videotaping of their classroom behavior very valuable in changing their classroom interaction patterns. Indeed, when teachers perceive students in positive ways, they change their behavior patterns to a more meaningful level. (7, 28, 33, 71, 88)

Interaction behaviors that seem to prompt positive student reaction include the teacher's use of "we" statements, teacher contact with students while they are working, and the teacher's use of gestures that indicate to the students that they are valued. Contrast the following two teaching scenes:

A. "Mary, that project is coming along nicely—you might want to talk with Mr. Brogan about the painting design."
B. "Mary, are you still building that project? My, almost everyone is ready to paint today!"

In Scene A we have a very supportive teacher who is viewing the student as an individual and is providing further direction for completing the project. Scene B, in contrast, is a very negative teacher interaction with the student. Certainly, the student must feel inadequate, and possibly hostile toward those in the classroom, after such an experience.

Responding

The formation of student behaviors is in large part due to the way that adults respond to their early attempts at behavior. Excellence (both academically and socially) is not achieved all at once—it is a process during which people refine and extend their skills. This process is dependent upon teacher responses to student attempts to improve their functioning in the classroom. Research in the field of human psychology clearly indicates that negative responses to undesirable behavior are ineffective in changing student behavior patterns. Not only are they ineffective as discipline methods, but even worse they tend to elicit further negative behavior. (17, 73, 80, 90)

Teachers have found that by forming a positive set of responses to different student behaviors, they can affect students in positive ways. For example, the following situation happens quite often in classrooms:

> "Lisa, you've been out two days now. Please see me at recess because you'll need to get that work made up today!"

Now read the following response and ask yourself which approach promotes a positive atmosphere between teacher and student:

> "Lisa, we missed you! It's good to have you back. Janet, could you show Lisa what we've been working on and help her out! Thanks, Janet!"

In the second situation the teacher welcomes Lisa back, encourages others to help her, and in general creates a "we like you" feeling in the classroom. Even in difficult situations, positive teacher responses are desirable.

> "Paul, you must not feel well today! You know pushing is not our way of doing things. You spend some time alone until you can act more like the Paul I know."

This teacher's response indicates that Paul can behave better and helps him regroup his thoughts before rejoining the group. While there will be cases in which teacher responses must be firm, authoritative, and forceful in order to maintain classroom control, it is evident in the research that positive responses are most effective in limiting and/or solving classroom discipline problems. (40, 58, 77, 91)

Assessing

It is no great surprise that students who are assessed as academically weak also appear on "disruptive behavior lists." Likewise, we should not be surprised to find that teachers who assess their teaching behaviors periodically have fewer discipline problems than do teachers who hold to their cherished patterns of "teaching the same way as last year." The assessment process, when used to foster improved student and teacher behavior, can be a valuable method of making classrooms meaningful places for everyone. (2, 9, 45, 46)

Teacher assessment of student learning is important because of the effect it can have on the direction set for helping that student become a productive and self-managed human being. The problem with deficiency-oriented assessment is that it has a negative effect on student self concept, teacher perception of the student, and peer relationships within the classroom. The case of Jimmy Hall brings this point into focus:

> Jimmy, in kindergarten, was diagnosed as having speech problems, club feet, low I.Q., and minimal hearing loss. By third grade he was further assessed as a slow learner who must have at least some brain damage. At no point during this time period has any teacher become his friend, realized how his father's death affected Jimmy, or communicated with his mother about the problems faced by the family.

The term *assessment* implies that we "take stock of" and "set a course with a more positive direction." Unfortunately, and in too many cases, assessment is used to *sort* students into categories of winners and losers. Research shows that where assessment procedures are used to *promote* student development, the students most often respond by improving their behavior and school performance. The following student reactions to favorable teacher assessment behaviors confirm what classroom research studies have found:

Janet: Mr. Elsworth was quite clear with me that I had problems with writing skills. But that was okay because he helped me set up a plan to improve and constantly pointed out to me how I had improved!

Frank: Coach Glen set high expectations for himself, and our team followed his example. He had a way of showing you where to improve and how to improve without making you feel bad or belittled.

Rita: My third grade teacher changed my life. Until then I thought I

was dumb. She showed me how to do things, stuck by me, and helped my parents realize I was okay—going to be a fine person.

Most students are willing to accept their weaknesses when their strengths are highlighted and they are given an opportunity to improve. In essence, teacher behaviors such as *modeling*, *designing*, *interacting*, *responding*, and *assessing* are, according to research, very influential in either promoting or delimiting student behavior problems. (19, 27, 71, 93)

THE SCHOOL: LEADERSHIP STYLE INFLUENCES STUDENT BEHAVIOR

Classroom teachers (even those who function in self-contained settings) are not the only influential role models who affect student behavior. The school is an ecological system in which people are continuously influencing each other's behavior. One very important aspect of this environment is the leadership style of the educators who operate the school. While the principal is often viewed as the school's leader, it must be noted that every person in the school exhibits leadership in some capacity or role. When the behaviors of these people are combined, a style of human interaction that has a *high impact on how students behave* emerges. (6, 28, 34, 38)

A critical review of the research indicates that leadership styles can positively or negatively affect students' behavior patterns and their academic performance. Related to this is the fact that many "leaders" try hard to fulfill the role expectations set by their superiors. Job descriptions and role expectations often infer a desired leadership style to the person applying for the job. For example:

> NEEDED: *Middle School Counselor*. Position available for Fall 1980. Master's Degree in Guidance and Counseling is required. Primary responsibilities include handling severe discipline problems, working with local officials on juvenile delinquency, and taking care of student dismissals due to continuous violations of school rules.

This job description indicates that the leadership philosophy of the school district is a deficit type of philosophy. No mention is made of counseling, listening, and relating to students, teachers, and/or parents. Indeed, a person with a degree in criminal justice might be best qualified

for this job. Although this example may seem extreme, it is, unfortunately, indicative of the leadership styles existent in many schools.

In contrast to the job description for a counselor, look at the following advertisement:

> NEEDED: *Elementary Principal.* Position available Fall 1980. A Master's Degree in School Leadership is desirable. Applicant should have some teaching experience and skills in working with people. We need a person who can utilize faculty talents, relate to students in a personal manner, and involve parents and citizens in the educational process. A sensitive, mature, and well-organized person will find this job most rewarding.

The emphasis in this description is on the principal's working with people, involving them in making decisions, and supporting them in the development of a humane learning setting. Just as students tend to adopt the expectations set by adults in the school, so it is with educational leaders.

Research indicates that the following leadership behaviors are positively related to productive student behavior:

1. Leaders who are visible and interact with students and teachers on a regular basis have fewer discipline problems than do leaders who isolate themselves. (28)
2. When leadership is shared by the school principal, teachers, students, and parents, a team approach to teaching and learning emerges and usually has a positive influence on student and teacher behavior. (60)
3. Leaders who are identified as open to the ideas of others (including teachers and students) and who are willing to incorporate these ideas in school plans have a positive effect on students and teachers. (86)
4. When leaders set high expectations for those in the school to reach toward (and provide support so that the expectations can be reached), students usually respond in positive and productive ways. (71)
5. When leaders reward positive behavior and focus on the strengths of individuals, they usually receive high productivity from people. (54)
6. Leaders who are firm, fair, and flexible in implementing school policies usually find that teachers and students are consistent and positive in their behavior. (82)
7. Leaders who are responsive to the needs of others and who attempt to accommodate such needs have a positive effect on how students and teachers relate to each other in the school setting. (4)
8. When leaders are predominantly characterized as counselors, lis-

teners, problem solvers, and doers, they generally have school settings in which positive human relations exist. (88)

The model for people to use in their daily interactions is established by the school leader. Settings where people are respected, made a part of the school, and given opportunities to behave responsibly are a result of productive leadership. In contrast, schools where people are treated as objects, constantly reminded to "stay in their place," and isolated from the decision-making process are indicative of ineffective leadership. In order to minimize discipline problems and maximize positive student behavior, the leadership team (principal, counselors, and teachers) must be acting as a group of people truly interested in the welfare of the students they teach.

THE CURRICULUM AND STUDENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

One of the basic functions of schools is to provide students with experiences by which they can become literate and functional as members of a democratic society. Even in a rural society (in which values were basically homogenous), it was a challenge for teachers to devise a curriculum that would meet the needs of students. In today's metropolitan, technologically complex, and ever-changing society, the challenge to formulate a viable curriculum is one of the teacher's most difficult tasks. Thus, poorly designed instructional programs have played a part in the continuing increase of classroom discipline problems. (83)

In a society that places emphasis on the "here and now," it is difficult for students to concentrate on subjects that *appear* to have little bearing upon their lives. However, when teachers design curriculum experiences that help students relate current happenings to past situations, the students' interest and performance are likely to improve. Some promising techniques teachers can use to make content relevant to student needs are as follows: (1) using analogies, (2) involving students in critically analyzing their culture, (3) having students chronologically trace the emergence of current social problems, (4) providing options so students can select topics of study, and (5) integrating academic subjects into the career and occupational objectives of students. Few students, for example, understand the skills they will need to perform their desired career roles. Instructional units that are related to the personal lives of

students will have a positive effect on student behavior patterns. (15, 19, 59)

Students who are assigned instructional tasks that are below or above their ability levels tend to perform in less than effective ways. A "lock step" curriculum is inadequate to meet the diverse ability levels of students. Many disruptive students are also having difficulty mastering content that is unrelated to their skill level. In the same respect, many students are not challenged by the curriculum. While there is no perfect curriculum–student match, it is evident that well-planned curriculums that are related to student abilities will decrease related student behavior problems. (28, 38, 76, 85)

Research findings in psychology and sociology indicate that both as individuals and as group members, people respond best in situations where they are challenged and given a setting to actively meet the challenge. Many students report that their best teachers were those who helped them reach a goal they never thought achievable. In studies that ask students to identify what they like best about school, the following responses are most often listed (38, 55, 71):

—My teacher! She really makes what we do important.
—The things we do! Last week we visited a nuclear power plant—that really made our science class lively that week.
—Art class! In art we *do* things and have a chance to improve on what we do.
—Mr. Kaiser's class! There is no fooling around in there. You know what is expected and he really teaches.

An experience-based curriculum that is accompanied by directed learning processes can be effective in helping students learn and behave productively. Involving students in selecting and/or designing certain aspects of the curriculum is yet another way of promoting positive student attitudes toward school. Instructional programs that are too abstract in content, poorly organized, unrelated to student needs and abilities, and lacking in coherence are among the major causes of disruptive behavior. (26, 43, 91)

THE COMMUNITY AND STUDENT BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

While teachers can (and should) use a variety of approaches in dealing with classroom discipline problems, no review of this subject would be

adequate without an examination of the relationship between the community setting and student behavior problems. The school is not an island unto itself. (69) It is no surprise, for example, that communities that have a high crime rate have a corresponding high rate of school vandalism. While many people still believe that such behavior problems are restricted to urban schools, the current research indicates they exist in all areas of our society. In examining school–community arrangements that seem to promote positive student behavior, the following items are of significance:

1. Schools that utilize community resources and facilities in their instructional program find school–community relations to be improved. (59)
2. Communities that actively support the schools by continually attempting to improve their quality minimize disruptive behavior and vandalism. (19)
3. Vandalism, delinquent crime rates, and classroom discipline problems are reduced in communities where students are given meaningful work experiences and are involved in directed recreational activities (such as in the extended school day program). (15)
4. Schools that use citizen advisory councils on a continuous basis report that the citizenry becomes more aware of problems such as classroom discipline and is usually supportive of teachers in their attempts to solve these problems. (19, 92)
5. Schools and communities where students are given responsibilities for managing their behavior and caring for the facilities report fewer behavior problems and less vandalism than do communities where students are not expected to participate in keeping things clean and safe. (3, 50)

Community involvement is vital to preventing and correcting student behavior problems. Community–school linkages such as cooperative career development programs, community-based school evaluation projects, ongoing advisory councils, shared extended school day and school year programs, public information campaigns, and other cooperative efforts have been used effectively to create positive school environments in many communities. The key to preventing school vandalism and excessive school discipline problems resides in positive leadership in both the school and the community. (19, 83)

Where school vandalism and disruptive student behavior are severe problems the community can play a major role in resolving the situation. For example, a common problem is the conflict over accepted values and expected behavior in the home, school, and community. When the divergence of home values and school values is extreme, classroom and

school discipline problems seem to increase. An effective way of dealing with this conflict is to develop a school–community dialogue by which differences can be resolved and a common goal established so that students understand that there is a desirable way of behaving, applicable to all facets of the community. (3)

Community attitudes toward the school system are significantly related to how students respond to their educational experience. When the predominant view of the schools is negative and/or hostile, students appear to adopt a similar perspective and exhibit uncooperative and even aggressive behavior toward school personnel. By forming a community involvement plan and promoting the positive aspects of school services to the community, a beginning can be made in building more functional school–community relationships. An authentic partnership, however, will occur only when teachers, parents, and citizens listen to each other and cooperatively design programs that reflect their combined concern. (92)

The myth that classroom discipline problems can be handled best by the teacher alone is not supported by research findings. The evidence indicates that every member of the community influences the way students behave. Indeed, the most current research clearly indicates that when parents, citizens, and teachers begin early in the life of the child to set a positive example of accepted behavior (and continue this effort), the results are very positive in terms of student social behavior and academic achievement. (51)

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